

THE FABER GALLERY

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# MATISSE

*with an introduction  
and notes by  
Jean Cassou*

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# Introduction by Jean Cassou

The painters for whom painting is, according to Leonardo's definition, 'cosa mentale' all image the world by symbols. They move in the serene climate where the mind makes microcosms and sets down diagrams and signs. These invented signs have their own life; they have their own forms of exaggeration (as we see in certain contours drawn by Ingres); and they can also arrest their course or stop short of their full deployment at any point if their work is done.

Let us begin by considering Matisse as belonging to this family of intellectual symbol-making artists; for he has in fact constructed for himself a language—or if you like a rhetoric—composed of equivalents, metaphors, hyperboles, ellipses and contractions; he has reduced the world of objects to an integrated system of plastic symbols.

He was a pupil of Gustave Moreau, a teacher so liberal-minded that his studio produced the young brood of the 'Fauves' including Matisse, Marquet and the great Rouault; and Moreau said to Matisse 'You are going to simplify painting'. Matisse has fulfilled the prophecy. But in his youth, before that happened, he was tempted by Impressionism, then still in its glory, to regard painting as interpretation of the sensuous and objective complexity of the visible world. If we look at his first works, and in particular at *La Desserte* (*The Dining Table*) of 1897, we must admit that he could produce, as well as another, the velvety or transparent surfaces of delectable objects—fruit, metals, carpets, plates—of everything in a dining room bathed in ordinary light which appeals to the senses of taste and touch. But if we compare these early works with two later pictures of the same title—one a harmony in blue and the other an arrangement in reds, with their decorative scrolls and their spaces of flat colour—we find that in the later works the material has been translated into the 'Matissian' language, for all the objects are now reduced to plastic equivalents by the action of a clear controlling mind. These equivalents form an arabesque which has its own purpose, goes its own way, and does not recoil, if need be, or if it pleases, from the most unexpected hyperbole. All the component elements of each object are summarized in symbolic line; and only the contour has significance.

Each of the various families of artists who make up the history of art takes a certain aspect of reality as its starting point and establishes on that basis its own special hierarchy of values. Some give primacy to light, and these work with the play of shadows, stressing them on the one hand or leaving them out on the other; in their pictures objects are thrust into relief, or are drowned, absorbed, dissolved in shadow or in light. Others take perspective, simple or multiple, as their starting-point. The family in

which we first placed Matisse is that in which the masters make their pupils enter a door labelled 'School of Drawing'; sheer line has to render the greatest possible amount of reality—without the help of shadows; and it is only after long experience, and then very modestly, that the line feels ready to concern itself also with the hitherto forbidden characters—volume and expression.

But Matisse's temperament is rich and complete. He is not an intellectual in the narrow sense of the word. He uses abstraction, but his mentality is the opposite of abstract. He is a draughtsman by nature, but he is not only a draughtsman. He could never be content to resolve the splendour of the world into plane geometry. The world means colour, and that too claims its rights and demands its own symbols and equivalents; and it was to accomplish this that he launched the Fauve movement—the great revolution to which all the finest painters of his time have contributed each in the way dictated by his talents.

The Fauve movement created scandal in the Autumn Salon of 1905. The Fauve painters said: Colour, visible and seductive garb of the world's succulence, demands homage not only from the eye—its easy prey—but also and still more from the intellect. We grant that claim. Our intellects will respond to colour and solve its problems. Our minds will clarify it into signs and translate it to simplified equivalents. We shall transpose its brilliance and violence into an equivalent brilliance and violence; but the transposition will be effected on the mental plane, it will be governed by our will and expressed in a language created for the purpose. We shall release colour on the one hand from its mundane representational service and restrain it on the other from casual appeals to the senses. And we shall do this by sublimating colour to pure tones and arranging those pure tones in ordered configurations. That done colour will resume its own life and its autonomy, and reveal, shoulder to shoulder with pure line, prodigious undreamed-of new resources of its own.

Matisse's work starts from the intellect—and the result, at the end, is what we call painting. We might expect this painting to lack the qualities which intellectualism is commonly assumed to dispense with. But this is not so, because Matisse's mind is satisfied only by total achievement; he remembers Poussin's 'I have neglected nothing'. I elected, at the outset, to place him in the family of draughtsmen, indeed among its most abstract members; but that was only that I might end by extolling him as a colourist. For he is a colourist, and one of the subtlest, most vigorous and delectable of all time. His name remains linked with one of the most joyful,



Plate 1. *The Dressing Table*. See page 24

most fundamental revolutions ever accomplished by colour. In the realm of colour his pictures are a dazzling miracle of freshness. 'Instinct is no longer a guide; it has strayed; we are trying to rediscover it.' The poet Guillaume Apollinaire wrote these words at the beginning of his essay on Matisse in 1907; but a few lines further on, when he had finished discussion of the painter's early work, he was able to exclaim: 'Instinct has now been rediscovered!'

In point of fact the several aspects of Matisse's work, which I have taken separately so as to make my analytical demonstration clearer, and which I have presented as the outcome of a series of methodical researches, were all co-existent in the earliest expressions of his individual genius. The mind divides and distinguishes but the final result is a unification. What has been rediscovered

and appears, in consequence, as the fruit of research, was there in principle from the beginning. In fact every part was there and harmonized into a whole. It is only our survey that has unfolded the aspects one after another and postponed their combination as ultimate reward. But the reward was all the time there, and Matisse's discoveries have been offered to our minds and senses from 1907 onwards.

Having considered each separate aspect in this art, the analyst can indulge in general contemplation and enjoy the extraordinary novelty of the total achievement and especially its chief charm and value—the scale of colours, a scale so lively, so rich and so complete that even black takes its place within it as a positive colour like the others. The analyst, turned contemplator, can now see—embarrassing though it be to him as analyst and expositor

—that Matisse at the very outset of his researches, and through some kind of meditative intuition, rediscovered all the various treasures of the realm of instinct, all those direct experiences of the heart and senses, without which the discoveries made by sheer intellect would be arid, cold and vain. I began by leaving objective reality on one side; but we can now admit it without reservations. For

exists and has always existed in the art of Matisse; it is translated into symbols, it is true, but never into abstract esoterics; Matisse's symbols are always legible, and we can name them at first glance by the names that are dearest to the hearts of all men and women on our planet.

Matisse's thought is never biting and ironic; it is free from the painful and tortuous airs so often affected by personal intellectual effort. Look at the titles of his pictures, *The Joy of Life*, *Luxury*, or the title he has borrowed from Baudelaire's line: '*Luxe, Calme et Volupté*.' The results of his researches are truly delightful; there is no heart-rending here, no tragedy, not even the purely cerebral and imaginary tragedy commonly associated with metaphysical inquiries. Matisse's metaphysical inquiries are those of a painter. His intellectual operations, his simplifications, his formulae are those of a painter. He has found equivalents and symbols for real objects; but we must not say, as so many people do, that he has found and expressed their 'essence'. That would be to postulate a 'depth' outside the province of painting, which is concerned—and this applies especially to Matisse—with the *surface* of phenomena. The painter's business is to create an infinity, a wealth of suggestion, by means which appear essential to him because he has chosen them and because they are simple. It is a problem in economy of means, a problem which Matisse has solved with marvellous skill. The line, with its direction, emphasis and, maybe, exaggeration, conveys the shape and movement; while the coloured surface conveys the richness and charm of our world of sunshine, of women, of flowers and Mediterranean loveliness. His elliptical procedures, his amazing clarifications, take us to heights where the keenest minds can rejoice and share the artist's triumphs; for the pleasure of the eye—the ultimate supreme delight—has been conjured for us by the calm and lucid labours of the artist's will.

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And here I must speak of dissociation (mental separation of the phenomena selected for the picture) which is a basic procedure in the intellectual, distilling method used by artists of the Matisse type.

To understand this procedure—which operates both in the field of form and in the field of colour—we must put aside all concepts of phenomena 'bathed' in this or that. Art critics love this term; they speak of things 'bathing' in atmosphere; and also of paintings 'bathed' in light or gold or pale radiance or in a haze of sky or sea. In Matisse's method there is no place for any such

'bathing'; in the history of painting his pictures rank in the important category where such 'bathing' is unknown. In this method there is no merging or mingling of the objects perceived by the artist's eye and mind, there is no confusion, no immersion of phenomena in a natural element acting as common denominator; the universe is not perceived as a solid or a fluid or mystic entity; nothing is dissolved because no solvent is admitted; there is no swimming because there is no stream.

I am trying, as you see, to speak from the standpoint of Matisse and artists of his type. They reject the seductions of the passive contemplative attitude. They see unity before them but it is the unity as it were of the forms and colours of a spinning top; air, light, and shimmering confusion are supreme; everything is subjected to that supremacy and becomes thereby disrupted and disembodied. Matisse rejects that supremacy, or rather, he ignores it as foreign to his purpose. He grants no natural element the right to rule and immerse individual phenomena. He will have none of this 'bathing'. His eye visits one thing after another, rests on one thing after another, examines it, un-forms it and re-forms it; and then all are reborn as separate entities, dissociated, each in its own right.

The eye that can do this is marvellously independent and free to indulge in closely fixed attention. Nothing disturbs that attention; no aureole of mist or light, no radiations, no dust screens impede it; the clear questioning eye bears directly on the objects; it convokes them one after another and they arise—as sounds arise beneath the hand of a pianist sending clearly, without pedal, note after note, into the vast nakedness of surrounding silence. The musician, listening with half closed eyes apprehends this series of even, crystal, unalterable sounds, poised hazardously with nothing to cling to but the line they themselves create and nothing to retreat to in case of hesitancy—and the artist apprehends the equivalent as his eye evokes forms poised hazardously above the virgin page.

For it is now the part of the artist's mind to grasp the meaning of his eye's discoveries. It is the artist's mind that must subject them to a rhetoric of signs, equivalents, metaphors, hyperboles, ellipses, syncopes and so forth. And that is why the objects must first be apprehended stripped of all haze, even a haze of sunlight; there must be nothing between the mind and the objects; and the objects must be nothing but themselves; for then and then only can they be assembled to the picture's form on the blackboard of the artist's thought.

Intellectual understanding always simplifies, and its simplifications sometimes appear to be impoverishments because they take us back to innocence. Apollinaire also meant that when he spoke of the rediscovery of instinct; for it is accurate to speak of instinct rediscovered by all this science and study and all these operations of the will

when the result of the effort is the restoration of original simplicity and frankness, when the artist has disentangled complexities, rediscovered the individuality of each object uninfluenced by its neighbour, and revealed each unconsciously sincere and simple, in the clear lines and frank colours of childhood. I need hardly say that I am not ascribing unconscious sincerity and ingenuousness to the artist—(for it is, on the contrary, the subtlety of his intellect that I am admiring all along); it is the objects and colours which he has restored to us that have become unconsciously sincere and simple. We could call Matisse ‘sincere’, in one sense, if he were to copy the local tones, shimmerings of light, atmospheric nuances, reflected colours and so forth in his selected scenes. But he does not do this. The sincerity here is in the actual colours that he sets one against another because each one is pure and perfect without adulteration or admixture. The names of these colours have been learned by every schoolboy in his first spelling book. And so it is also with the lines; they have become—as the result of long research—the most completely simple lines that can be abstracted from the object studied.

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And at the end the joy of the real world shines towards us from this scholarly work. We are in the domain of the intellect yet we find there—and find in abundance—all the pleasures ordinarily asked of painting conceived as the creation of physical images. For here we have a calm intelligence at work in regions where, hitherto, we had expected to find nothing but sensuous delight and lazy contemplation. Nice and her windows opening on to a sapphire paradise, the Orient, its odalisques, the flowers on its carpets as lovely as the flowers in its vases, are not merely settings for Matisse’s art, they are of its very substance. His mind pursues its work upon all this beatitude. Here too, it singles out, examines, reduces things to symbols, lines, arabesques and pure flat tints. But there is no need of a special glossary to translate the symbols back. Everything here is multiple, rich, exuberant, close-packed; dissociated symbols come together side by side on the two-dimensional plane; shapes are spread over the surface like water-lilies on a pond; a dress delights in the fullness of its curve, it opens out and displays its swelling folds; real flowers appear and their forms are magnified to achieve relation with neighbouring symbols, and real leaves rival the calligraphic charm of leaves and flowers on cushions and walls. And thus the whole picture is saturated with pattern like a rug.

But this is something different from mere decorative adornment. It is vital decoration because the artist’s mind has given life to each component, quite impartially, admitting no hierarchy, protecting each from domination by air or light or space and even protecting material things and vegetation from domination by the humans. The artist has separated the components, has concen-

trated deeply upon each and disposed them all within the two dimensions of the canvas; and each component, however frail, draws courage from his sympathy, and feels itself as it were a sovereign state, for dignity and autonomy have been conferred upon it. The symbol for the flower, the symbol for the woman, the symbol for the arm, the dress, the pattern on the tapestry, the clear tone of the stripes on the dress and the clear tone of the sky—all these little creatures of the artist’s mind, all these tiny and important objects of his affections, all these co-equal monads, form a humming symphony like a swarm of bees. Together they find their respective positions, their mutual balance, together they are displayed without ever cutting into space or casting a shadow. And the result is something that satisfies the mind—and is at the same time infinitely charming and delightful.

For Matisse has the secrets of grace and charm. The reality studied by his grave genius and his high intellectual integrity is the happiest form of reality, the Mediterranean form, and his work is always perfectly urbane. The dour intellect that affects unsociable ways does not always ring quite true. For after all there is the sun, there is the blue that is not only the painter’s ideal blue but may be also the blue of the loveliest real sky; there is the world and the window that opens on to the world; and near the window in Matisse’s pictures there are figures of young women; there is the fullness of life and the superb serenity of pleasure; and a mind that is truly comprehensive and completely human cannot ignore these good and beautiful things. Matisse, assuredly, does not ignore them; he incorporates them quietly with harmonious dignity in his meditations; he lifts them into intellectual art but takes care to leave them their everyday attraction.

Matisse is not, like Valéry, a native of the Mediterranean—that home of wisdom and of physical and spiritual pleasures. He comes from a region that is gloomy, flat and laborious, a region whose rich soil and humid skies have also given much to the art of painting. But the Mediterranean has captured him; it accords with his intellectual pride, his urge to realize things in their utmost clarity and, as in the case of Valéry, it has inspired him to desire and to achieve a union of mental adventure with calm apprehension by the senses.

Matisse’s mind roves in these pleasant places and finds there its own delicately balanced joy. It is as far removed as anything can be from the ‘fine frenzy’ of the romantic artist. The laws it has framed and imposed in the fields of form and colour may be relaxed on occasion before the adorable charms of the Mediterranean goddess; but they remain nevertheless the Matissian laws—the laws of elision, of harmony, of reticence that characterize his art; even when yielding to sensuous contemplation the rhythm of his mind persists in its restraint and grandeur.

Matisse’s painting is the art of a mature artist. His

*Plate 2*  
LUXURY  
(*Le luxe*)

Paris: National Museum of Modern Art

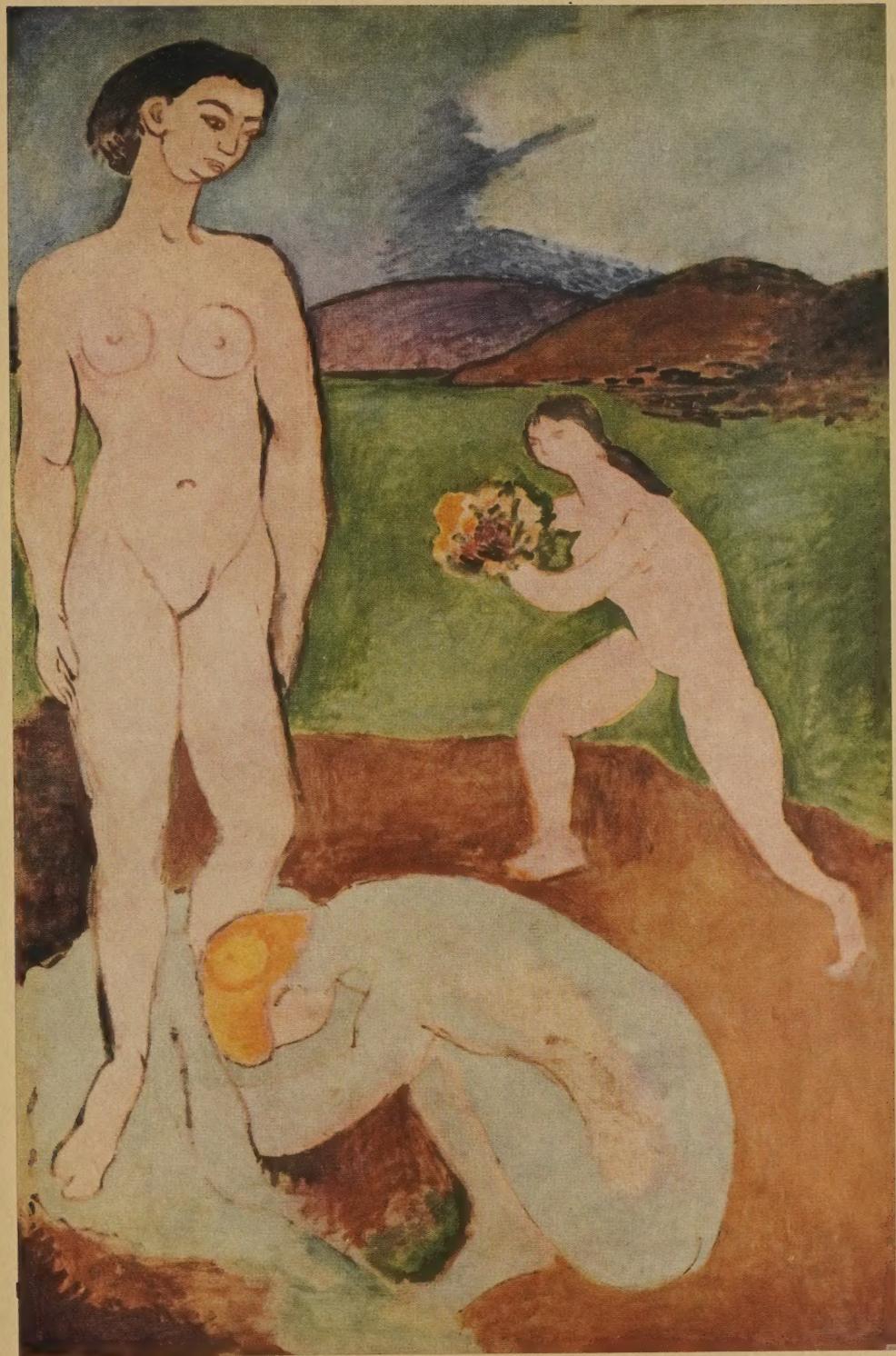
1906-7

84 in. by 55½ in.

‘*Luxe, Calme et Volupté*’—this line, in which Baudelaire summarized his secret aesthetic doctrine, has inspired Matisse; and the word *luxe* is particularly dear to him. It may be that luxury (in the sense of intense aesthetic refinement) is the final quality which he aims at suggesting as outcome of the austeries, the contractions, the elisions, the ellipses, and the other renunciations on which his method is built; and—contradictory though it may seem—this quality may be near to the direct awareness of primordial innocence.

This admirable canvas, dating, like the *Joie de Vivre*, from the centre of the Fauve period, is related to the large pictures with dancing figures that Matisse painted later. Here, on a prehistoric seashore, synthesis of countless landscapes, are figures, more naked than the nakedness we know, suggesting life at its embryonic start; but their gestures are those of a life full of vigour; and from the Edenic luxuriance of tints, one of these primitive aesthetes has chosen the colours of the opal for her adornment.\*

\* EDITOR'S NOTE.—The picture *Joie de Vivre* referred to in this note is reproduced in my *Modern French Painters*.  
R. H. W.



*Plate 3*  
TREE NEAR A POOL AT TRIVAUXT  
*(Arbre près de l'étang de Trivaux)*

London: Tate Gallery

1916

35½ in. by 28½ in.

In the first part of his career Matisse painted a number of landscapes; and here too we find, as may be expected, a stripping down to essentials which always produces an impression of grave austerity. A few lines, firmly drawn, suffice to indicate the movement of a tree and the swell of the earth beneath; then a few spaces are spread with olive and silver greens and the foliage is there to play its part and reveal the painter's brilliant gifts as a colourist.



*Plate 4*  
THE PAINTER IN HIS STUDIO  
*(Le peintre et son modèle)*

Paris: National Museum of Modern Art

1913

58 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. by 38 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

This is one of Matisse's most complete and characteristic pictures. Its arrangement already shows his power of creative thought. His concern would seem to have been with multiple effects of perspective and geometry; for he has chosen a corner of a room as his material, and, through an opening in one side of the angle, he has also given us an outdoor scene. The subject of the picture is determined by the position of the artist's eye; and what it sees is a three-quarter back view of a painter comparing his model with the portrait he is painting. The model thus appears twice in two different perspectives. Moreover, this duplication of the only two coloured spots in the picture, a green and a purple, is exploited as the central passage in a very unusual colour scheme where the dominants are black and white. It is truly a lasting pleasure to study these intricacies of construction and the several counterpoints.



*Plate 5*

ODALISQUE IN GREY TROUSERS  
*(Odalisque à la culotte grise)*

Henri Matisse Collection  
1918

Matisse has made two journeys in Morocco, and his favourite home is in the region of Nice. But these actual contacts matter little; what matters more is the fact that the Mediterranean and the Orient are his spiritual passions; these regions have provided him with themes and with material, but he could quite well have invented them without this aid, because he is by nature a Mediterranean, an Oriental, and an Orientalist. His odalisques are as much the daughters of his imagination as the odalisques painted by Ingres were the daughters of his. He loves to draw the arabesques of their nonchalant bodies and to relate them to fruit and flowers and—more important to him perhaps—to the patterns on walls and carpets by which his fantasy is so deliciously set free.



*Plate 6*  
**DECORATIVE FIGURE**  
*(Figure décorative sur fond ornemental)*

Paris: National Museum of Modern Art

1917

52 in. by 39 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

**A**s in the picture reproduced in Plate 5, life and decoration are here combined and produce the same result, though in this case the conjunction is even more deliberate and stressed. The picture, in fact, recalls the words of M. Georges Duthuit, who said of Matisse that, in his hands 'decoration becomes expression'. For the decoration here is not purely ornament; it is not something added on; it is plastic; and, on the other hand, the living elements in the picture are handled with a degree of symbolic calligraphy that brings them close to expressive decoration. The patterns of the textiles have a curiously intense life of their own and at the same time the upright back of the odalisque takes part in the decorative structure of the whole; similarly the leaves of the plant and the plant forms on the carpet combine in a single harmony. And all this is pure painting—a luxuriant world of colours and lines.



*Plate 7*  
STILL LIFE  
(*Nature morte*)

Private Collection

**T**hough the art of Matisse is analytical and mind-controlled it always recaptures reality in its final flowering. Matisse, indeed, has said that he has need of nature. He never loses touch with her. And the spectacle of nature seizes and holds him by its most potent weapon: colour.

All the splendours of the world are displayed in the chromatic feast of this fine still life. The artist's scrupulous science on the one hand and simple loyalty on the other have carried the colours here to the supreme degree both of freshness and intensity.



Plate 8

THE WHITE DRESS

*(La robe blanche)*

Paris: M. Georges Renand  
1944

**W**hen we think of Matisse's work we think of flowers and also of women. All his intellect is directed to the creation of delight, to the exaltation of the physical world in its happiest and most graceful aspects. The women in his compositions are charming; as charming as their sisters, the women who charm us in the worlds created by Watteau and Ingres.

I have spoken of the processes of analysis and dissociation that Matisse uses; and in the course of them he often concentrates on one attribute of his women models—a white dress, a jade necklace, a Rumanian blouse, a blue hat—and makes it the centre of interest in his picture. In this case, all the plastic forms, all the patches of colour, all the lines, the pattern on the wall, the blue carpet, the yellow on the chair—pay homage to the presence, to the personality, so to speak, of the dress which parades its ravishing simplicity with such grace.



HENRI MATISSE

Plate 9  
TWO GIRLS  
*(Les deux amies)*

Paris: National Museum of Modern Art

1941

24½ in. by 20 in.

Here it is a tartan skirt that plays the part of prima donna in Matisse's plastic opera, and the artist has charged it with his most potent spells. The girl in the yellow dress leans lazily against it and the line of her arm has appealed not so much to the colourist as to the draughtsman who has been moved here to one of those exaggerations, those hyperboles, which shock the general public, but which in fact give the precise curves and angles the sweep of the line demands.

In 1918, in a talk with the 'Grand Revue', Matisse spoke of 'the gravity which persists in every human being'. His sense of this persistent gravity accounts for the fascinating nobility of the women in his pictures. These women are static, quietly affirming their existence, strangely present in our experience. Their grace has nothing frivolous about it; many charming things seem ephemeral in their nature; but the grace of these figures is more permanent, because it is more serious, in kind.



H. Matisse 10

*Plate 10*  
THE BLUE HAT  
(*Le chapeau bleu*)

Henri Matisse Collection

1944

**H**ere the artist's attention has clearly been arrested by the quiet but insistent note of the blue hat; but the wide convolutions of the dress, spread out like an upturned flower, also play an important part in the poem.

The word 'poem' is called for to describe such works. For they are evolved with supreme lucidity and expressed in a learned rhetoric which has reduced all the elements to symbols, and combined them in metaphors without losing sight of the real world. Matisse has felt and savoured the real world around him and we can recognize that world in these poetic pictures because it animates them and sings through them to our senses. His work is a *Paradise Regained* distilled from Baudelaire's '*luxe, calme et volupté*', from the joy of life, the delights of the senses, from charm and grace, from women and flowers. But that paradise has only been recaptured by a lifetime of analysis and intellectual effort and the quiet unruffled exercise of will.



Matisse  
1902-44

exacting intellect, his quickening will, are tested by contact with the delights of a world appealing to the senses; petulant youth may regard these appeals as seductive whirlwinds, but the mature artist faces them and yields to them gently, calmly, with perfect urbanity, regarding

them simply as new experiences—and indeed the most important of all experiences because best able to give man worthily the sense of his full powers. And thus the works of Matisse are subtle operations of the mind, and also images of joy.

(Translated from the French.)

## Note on Plate 1 THE DRESSING TABLE (*La coiffeuse*)

London: Tate Gallery  
(Formerly Sir Hugh Walpole's Collection)  
c. 1919  
29 in. by 36½ in.

We have to think ourselves back into the fresh violent air of the Fauve revolution to realize why the art of Matisse, which is really the result of knowledge and hard thought, appeared, on the surface, to the public, as the product of shocking ignorance and absurd clumsiness—as a return indeed to the style of the primitives or a relapse into childishness. But in fact, of course, the ingenuousness is the reward of effort. As Apollinaire said in the exclamation quoted in the introduction, instinct can only be recaptured after meditation and much work. The simplicities of Matisse's art are simplifications—simplifications firmly stated, elisions and exaggerations deliberately organized, happy results of inspired research.

How charming and exquisitely refined is the subtle assembling of tones in this picture—with the black notes struck by the hair and the lines indicating the eyebrows and the eyes and the other features of the face. You may call the lines childish, if you will, but to me they are a marvellous shorthand, exactly what was needed, perfect. What we have here is not poverty but a wonderful economy of means, the acme of delicacy and taste.

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R. H. W.

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